

The First Messiah

Intro: In 1985, newspapers reported the finding of a manuscript of Handel's Messiah in the basement of the Royal Irish Academy of Music. It had been concealed by a former archivist and its presence forgotten. The reason for the secrecy was an ink stamp on the cover of the manuscript. It declared the manuscript to be the property of Mercer's Hospital in Dublin.

Chryssa McAlister, student of medicine at Dalhousie University spent the summer in Dublin investigating the first performance of Handel's Messiah...

(clog footsteps, sound of echo in church. Pulls up organ bench. Few warm-up squeaks of bellows.

Play: Opening chord on organ superimposed on opening of Overture from original 1742 Messiah)

(fade, with voice over, but music plays on)

Narrator: It is the spring of 1742. Georg Frederik Handel sits down at the Organ of Dublin's St. Michan's Church to run through his latest, not yet performed oratorio.

Entitled Messiah, he knew it would become his masterpiece of masterpieces: the work by which he would be remembered. But he had not yet decided where and how it should have its premiere.

(Overture rises, interlude, fades but continues)

It is well known that the first performance of Handel's Messiah took place in Dublin, in 1742. What is not well known is why he chose Dublin and the circumstances surrounding Messiah's premiere.

I decided to go to Dublin to discover more about Messiah's first performance. Dublin is a city of incredible history, whose buildings and monuments tell stories of war, famine, and independence but also art and culture. With infamous playwrights, poets and artists, such as Swift, Wilde, Joyce and Yeats, Dublin is definitely a city of discovery. I went to investigate Handel's visit to Dublin, in the archives of the National Library, Trinity College Library and Marsh's Library.

One morning, I biked over to Kevin Street to find Marsh's Library, not far from the city center. Marsh's is Ireland's oldest public library, founded in 1701 by the Archbishop of Dublin. Once governed by Dean Jonathan Swift, it is located within the grounds of St. Patrick's Cathedral and is preserved as a 17th C scholar's library. I walked up the staircase to a great oak door and was greeted by the keeper. There I discovered walls of dark oak bookcases, packed to the towering ceilings with thousands of precious volumes.

Even the 300-year old cages, once used to lock in readers with rare books, are still preserved. At Marsh's I discovered accounts of Handel's visit to Dublin....

(Overture rises, ends)

Having just arrived in Dublin for the first time that past November, 1741, Handel spent the winter musical season by presenting a series of successful subscription concerts of his other works, all of which were very well received...

His own letters are preserved and published in Deutsch's documentary biography of Handel, a book that I discovered in Dublin's National Library...

Actor: "Dublin, December 29th 1741. Dear Mr. Jennens, The nobility did me the honour to make amongst themselves a subscription for 6 nights, which did fill a room of 600 persons. So that I needed not sell one single ticket at the door. And without vanity, the performance was received with a general approbation."

Narrator: In Dublin, Handel quickly established his reputation as an outstanding composer and performer amongst the local nobility. However, his success in Dublin was much greater than in London.

For the past 30 years, Handel had made London his home. He first visited England in 1710, while he was Maestro di Capella in the court of the Elector of Hanover. In London, he became immensely popular with royalty and the public, so much so that he decided to move to England in 1712, where he would spend the rest of his life.

Handel's earlier years in London were not very prosperous. He mostly composed Italian operas, which were suitable to English taste. Often he composed these operas with particular soloists in mind. One such soloist, the Italian soprano Senesino, was wildly popular with the English, but not with Handel. Eventually, Handel refused to compose for Senesino all together.

The English nobility took notice. It then became quite fashionable to deem Handel's works unworthy of attention.

(sounds of people inside, card playing, music)

Actor: Lady Brown, a well known member of the aristocracy, is remembered as having "distinguished herself as a persevering enemy to Handel, and a protectress to foreign musicians, in general, of the new Italian style and was the first person of fashion who had the courage, at the risk of her windows, to have concerts on a Sunday evening."

Narrator: Unfortunately, this new found opposition placed a growing financial burden on Handel, as his large-scale orchestral performances were not well remunerated.

Actor: “Enmity and prejudice were still active to oppress him. His operas were performed to empty houses, and his oratorios and other English works did not meet with support sufficient to indemnify him.”

Narrator: During this difficult period, Handel began to seek higher themes of inspiration and decided to dedicate his life solely to sacred music and the oratorio.

(break to Messiah: O thou who tellest good tidings to Zion)

(sound of plume and manuscript)

Messiah, Handel’s most successful oratorio, was composed entirely within the space of twenty-three days. In August of 1741, Charles Jennens, a librettist, sent the newly compiled arrangement of the scriptures to Handel. By September 14th of that year, Messiah was complete.

(For unto us is born a child)

Shortly after this, Handel fled London for Dublin, without notice. Even Mr. Jennens, his collaborator and close friend, was surprised to hear of his departure:

Actor: “I heard with great pleasure at my arrival in Town, that Handel had set the Oratorio of Messiah; but it was with some mortification to me to hear that instead of performing it here he was gone into Ireland with it. However, I hope we shall hear it when he comes back”

(Pifa interlude starts, fades but continues)

Narrator: In Dublin Handel’s subscription concerts are performed to full houses, as the movement of fashion in London had little reach or effect on the people of Dublin. Handel is received with all possible marks of esteem and admiration.

(Start to bring in street noises 18thC, sounds of horse driven carriage, people on the streets)

The newly built hall, Neale’s Musik Hall, where Handel performed his music, is on Fishamble Street, one of the oldest streets in Dublin and a place for the genteel and the wealthy ...

Actor: “It was the festive resort of the wealthy and refined. Ladies in hoops and feathers and white gloved. And swords and chapeau with scores of liveried footmen and pages and the press of coaches and chariots and sedan chairs.”

(Pifa rises and ends, interlude)

In the hopes of finding Neale's Music Hall, I ventured through Dublin to find Fishamble Street, just up from the River Liffey. To my disappointment, the only acknowledgment of this historic site is a plaque bolted into the wall of a Handel Hotel...difficult to imagine that this was once a place for entertaining the nobility.

(Music)

Narrator: Handel is overwhelmed by his popularity in Dublin and decides that the first performance of Messiah should take place on the 13th of April 1742 in Neale's Musik Hall, with the rehearsal to be held the preceding week.

(And lo, the Angel of the Lord)

His reputation in Dublin is well established before he announces Messiah's performance date. He also ensures satisfactory results by bringing the performers with him to Dublin: Signora Avoglio, an Italian soprano; Mrs. Cibbers, an English Mezzo-soprano and an organist, Mr. Maclaine.

Despite having brought this excellent organist with him, Handel advertised, in Dublin's Faulkers' Journal, that he would play the organ himself on the opening night.

(noises of rehearsal, Glory to God)

Actor: "Dear Mr Jennens, Signora Avoglio, which I brought with me from London pleases extraordinarily. I have formed another Tenor Voice, which gives great satisfaction; the Basses and Counter Tenors are very good, and the rest of the chorus singers (by my direction) do exceedingly well, as for the Instruments they are really excellent. Mr. Dubourgh being at the head of them, and the Musik sounds delightful in this charming room, which puts me in such spirits (and my health being so good) that I exert myself on my organ with more than usual success".

(Continuation of Glory to God, Good will towards Men. Interlude)

Narrator: Handel arranged to donate the proceeds of Messiah's first performance to three charities: the Society for Relieving Prisoners, the Charitable Infirmary and Mercer's Hospital. In the years following his first visit to Dublin, Handel would continue to donate his score of Messiah and allow performances of his music for the benefit of numerous charitable foundations.

This, I discovered, partially explains why Messiah is now performed at Christmas instead of Easter: first started in Dublin, it was changed to further benefit charitable foundations. I also discovered that William Boyce, an 18thC organist and composer at Chapel Royal in London, rearranged parts of Messiah as a Christmas anthem. Not long after, London musical societies began performing Messiah at Christmas, a tradition that has spread across the world.

(music)

Handel laid out several conditions and stipulations to the charities involved in the first performance. One of which was the participation of two choirs: St Patrick's Cathedral choir and Christ Church choir. These conditions were an essential component to Messiah's success.

These two choirs did agree to benevolently participate in the first performance of Messiah, but with some difficulty. The charitable foundations applied to the Deans of Christ Church and St. Patrick's Cathedral for their assistance. However, the renowned Dean Jonathan Swift, author of Gulliver's Travels, forbade the choirs from assisting in the performance of sacred music at a secular establishment such as Neale's Musik Hall...

Actor: (I deny) "to certain vicars to assist a club of fiddlers in Fishamble Street...to appear there, as songsters, fiddlers, pipes, trumpeters, drummers, drum-majors, or in any sonal quality..."

Narrator: Eventually, on account of the charitable nature of the request, Dean Jonathan Swift agreed to the conditions and the choirs began to prepare for the performance.

(Street noises, cobble stones)

Members of the public are to buy their tickets from Handel's Dublin house on Abbey Street. As with Handel's series subscription concerts, ticket holders are entitled to attend the rehearsal performance of Messiah, as well as the formal performance the following week. I discovered that was a common practice at the time for large-scale performances.

The oratorio concerts of the 18th C were different to today's. They seldom involved more than 2 dozen voices, mainly members of cathedral choirs. The first performance of Handel's Messiah also differed greatly from today's version, with Mozart's arrangement now used most frequently. Handel often directed his Oratorios from the organ, on which he improvised throughout the performance. Today's performances, however, do not feature the organ as prominently, as Mozart's version replaces many of the organ parts with wind parts.

(linker music, people gathering in a concert hall)

In anticipation of a large audience, Faulkner's Journal announces:

(newspaper sounds)

Actor: "Ladies are requested to come without hoops and gentlemen without swords"

I discovered Faulkner's Journal, a Dublin weekly, on microfiche at the National Library of Ireland. In Handel's time, the journal was a source of worldly current events and also local celebrities, gossip and advertisements. In the 1740s, Handel's stay and

performances in Dublin were well documented in Faulkner's Journal for the public to follow.

Narrator: Messiah is received enthusiastically by Dublin Society and an account of the night is written up in Dublin's Faulkner's Journal on April 17th 1742...

(newspaper sounds, sounds of crank of printer, sounds of newspaper office, behold the Lamb Of God)

Actor: "On Tuesday last, Mr. Handel's sacred Grand Oratorio, the Messiah, was performed in the New Music Hall in Fishamble street; the best judges allowed it to be the most finished piece of Musick. The sublime, the grand and the tender, adapted to the most elevated majestic, and moving words, conspired to transport and charm the ravished heart and ear. It is but justice to Mr. Handel, that the world should know he generously gave the money arising from this Grand performance to be equally shared by the Society for Relieving Prisoners, the Charitable Infirmary, and Mercer's Hospital, for which they will ever gratefully remember his Name, and that the gentlemen of the two choirs, Mr. Dubourg, Mrs. Avolio, and Mrs. Cibber, who all performed their parts to admiration, acted also on the same disinterested principle, satisfied with the deserved applause of the publick, and the conscious pleasure of promoting such useful and extensive charity. There were above 700 people in the room, and the sum collected for that noble and pious charity amounted to about £400, out of which £127 goes to each of the three great pious charities."

Narrator: The performance is so well received that Handel decides to reintroduce it to the Irish public in May of 1742. This would become Handel's final performance in Ireland.

(Linker sounds. Boat, Train, etc.)

Upon his return to London, In August of 1742, Handel wrote to his collaborator, Jennens of his reception in Dublin.

Actor: London. September 9th 1742. Dear Mr. Jennens, "It was indeed Your Humble Servant which intended You a visit in my way from Ireland to London, for I certainly could have given You a better account by word of mouth, as by writing, how well Your Messiah was received in that Country...I shall send the printed Book of the Messiah to Mister Sted for You. As for my Success in General in that generous and polite Nation, I reserve the account of it till I have the Honour to see you in London. The report that the direction of the Opera next winter is committed to my Care, is groundless. The gentlemen who have undertaken to middle with Harmony can not agree, and are quite in confusion. Whether I shall do some thing in the Oratorio way (as several of my friends desire) I can not determine as yet. Certain it is that this time 12 month I shall continue my Oratorio's in Ireland, where they are agoing to make a large Subscription already for that Purpose...I think it a very long time to the month of November next when I can have some hope of seeing You here in Town."

(He Trusted in God that He would deliver Him)

Narrator: A considerable change took place in English sentiment: many of the English nobility accepted this success and Handel regained popularity.

Actor: Dublin. Faulkner's Journal. March 1743. "Our Friend Mr. Handel is very well, and things have taken a quite different turn here from what they did some time past, for the publick will be no longer imposed on by the Italian singers and wrong-headed undertakers of bad operas, but find out the merit of Mr. Handell's compositions and English performances. That gentleman is more esteemed now than ever."

(Sounds of Audience)

Narrator: During Lent of 1743, Handel introduced Messiah to the English Nobility in London's Covent Garden Theatre. He was received with admiration, although some were uncomfortable with this sacred work being performed in a theatre.

(thou shalt break them with a rod of iron....leading into Hallelujah)

Actor: "The audience were exceedingly struck and affected by the music in general, but when the chorus struck up 'For the Lord God Omnipotent Reigneth', they were so transported, that they all, with the king who happened to be present, started up, and remained standing till the chorus ended; and hence it became fashion in England to stand while that part of the music is performing"

The tradition of standing during the Hallelujah Chorus remains to this day in modern performances of Handel's Messiah.

(Interlude: Hallelujah rises and ends....Behold, I tell you a mystery, the trumpet shall sound, fades but remains)

Handel's profound devotion to higher themes and the Holy Scriptures continued throughout his life. When asked of the public's interest in his Oratorios, Handel stated:

Actor: "I should be sorry if I only entertained them; I wish to make them better"

Narrator: Back in Dublin, it became a custom to perform Handel's sacred music yearly. In 1743, Handel sent a score of Messiah to be used for the benefit of several medical charities. The yearly charitable performance of Messiah at Mercer's Hospital became so popular that the Lord Chancellor and the twelve judges of the Irish House of Commons commonly adjourned on the day of the performance.

(Sounds of crowd, preparations, receiving the Chancellor, etc.)

Actor: "Music was a major source of income for Mercer's. The performances usually took place in St. Andrew's Church. They were splendid occasions attended by the Lord Lieutenant. A Captain's guard was mustered, stewards from the nobility and gentry carried gilt and white rods respectively; matting was laid in the nave, carpets and cushions were provided for distinguished guests, Parliament and the Law Courts were adjourned".

Narrator: Handel was also actively involved with English charitable foundations. Up until the year of his death, he participated in a yearly performance of Messiah for the benefit of the Foundling Hospital, established for English orphans. These annual concerts continue today under the Foundling Foundation. It is said that no other work of music has contributed to charitable foundations as much as Handel's Messiah.

The week before his death, Handel, blind in both eyes, appeared for the last time in public for the performance of Messiah on April 6th 1759, which he accompanied on the organ.

Actor: "To see him...led to the organ...at upwards of seventy five years of age, and then conducted towards the audience to make his accustomed obeisance, was a sight so truly afflicting and deplorable to persons of sensibility"

Narrator: Dr. Burney's description brings a vivid image of Handel to mind, performing his last Messiah...I realize now, through my discovery of Messiah's first performance in Dublin, that I spent all this time looking for a piece of paper, but instead I found a human being.

(I know that my redeemer liveth begins)

Handel would not leave his house after this last performance. In his dying bed he expressed a wish to die on a Good Friday...

Actor: In Hopes of Meeting his good God, his Sweet Lord and Saviour, on the day of His resurrection".

Narrator: Handel's wish was granted. He passed away at 75 years of age on the morning of Good Friday, April 13th 1759. Exactly 17 years after the first performance in Dublin of his most acclaimed work.

(I know that my redeemer liveth starts and fades to voice over)

Handel had spent 49 years of his life in England and requested to be buried in Westminster Abbey with a monument erected by his grave. Handel was buried in Poet's Corner and the monument erected by Roubidiac represents Handel in the act of composing his Messiah and setting "I know that my redeemer liveth" to music.

Actor: “I did think I did see all heaven before me, and the great God himself”

(I know that my redeemer liveth closes)

The First Performance of Handel’s Messiah was reported by Chryssa McAlister with Musical excerpts taken from..... All parts were played by Nigel Bennett.

Need: linker sentence for break in program.